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ABSTRACT

An investigation compared the demographic profiles of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and LEARN respondents to explore whether people who telephone Canadian literacy groups are representative of the full range of people with literacy needs. (LEARN is ABC Canada's media campaign to link potential learners with literacy groups.) Information was collected from more than 3,500 callers. Findings indicated that, in general, a number of demographic groups were not being reached in proportion to their literacy needs. Canadians between ages 16-44 were dramatically overrepresented among callers to literacy groups. Canadians more than 45 years of age were dramatically underrepresented. Although 55 percent of Canadians without high school diplomas were more than 45 years old, only 12 percent of LEARN callers were in this group. The fewer years of education those without a high school diploma had, the less likely they were to call literacy groups. Women with some secondary education made 10 percent fewer calls than expected and men 10 percent more than expected. In urban areas, women called 9 percent less often than expected, and in rural areas 2 percent more often. LEARN respondents were even more likely to be unemployed or to have part-time work than their educational peers from IALS. (YLB)

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Are We Meeting Canadian Literacy Needs?

A Demographic Comparison of IALS and LEARN Research Respondents

by Ellen Long
Research Ink

April 1997

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Executive Summary

In fall 1996, Statistics Canada released the Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). A few months before the IALS release, ABC CANADA completed a study on the impact of the LEARN campaign. Whereas IALS describes the literacy needs within the Canadian population, the LEARN study describes individuals who actually call literacy services.

This paper compares demographic profiles of IALS and LEARN respondents in order to explore a central question: are people who call Canadian literacy groups representative of the full range of people with literacy needs in Canada? Based on this IALS-LEARN comparison, it is fair to say a number of demographic groups are not being reached in proportion to their literacy needs. Among the results:

- Canadians between 16 and 44 years of age are dramatically over-represented among callers to literacy groups. Callers in this age range call 44% more often than IALS would lead us to expect.

- Canadians more than 45 years of age are dramatically under-represented among callers to literacy groups. Forty-three percent fewer calls than expected are made by those over the age of 45.

- Although 55% of Canadians without high school diplomas are more than 45 years of age, only 12% of LEARN callers are in this age group.

- The fewer years of education those without a high school diploma have, the less likely they will be to call literacy groups.

- Women with some secondary education make 10% fewer calls than expected (and men, therefore, 10% more than expected).

- In urban areas, women call 9% less often than expected, and in rural areas, 2% more often.

- LEARN respondents are even more likely to be unemployed, or to have part-time work than their educational peers from IALS.

Overview of IALS and LEARN Research

In fall 1996, Statistics Canada released the Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). This study measured, with a five level scale, the literacy rates of a representative sample of Canadians on prose, document, and quantitative reading skills.

A few months before the IALS release, ABC CANADA completed a study on the impact of the LEARN campaign.[1] The campaign is a national, multimedia outreach effort designed to link potential learners with literacy providers. The LEARN study asked 84 provincial literacy groups to survey all callers over a three month period from January to April 1996.[2] The groups collected information from more than 3,500 callers of which 2,142 were potential learners or family members/friends calling on behalf of potential learners. In addition to measuring the success of the LEARN campaign, the results of the survey tell us a great deal about the demographic profiles of individuals who try to access literacy services.

The existence of these two large databases of information--IALS and LEARN--makes it possible to begin seeking an answer to a basic question: are people who actually call literacy groups representative of the range of people who have literacy needs in Canada? An answer to this question can help literacy groups know which demographic groups to target in their outreach efforts.

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[1]For a full report of LEARN research results, see *The Impact of ABC CANADA's LEARN Campaign: Results of a National Survey*, 1996, by Ellen Long.

[2]Ten groups from the Yukon and NWT also participated in the LEARN research. Unfortunately, the information collected by these groups could not be used here because IALS excludes the Yukon and NWT. The original LEARN study could not include French Quebec because the French LEARN ads were not running when the research project started.

Purpose and Method

This investigation compares the demographic profiles of LEARN respondents with the demographic profiles of those with literacy needs as identified by IALS to compare the IALS and LEARN data, highest level of education is used as a control variable against which to compare age, sex, size of community, and employment status.[3] In essence, LEARN respondents are compared to their educational peers. This study does not presume to know the exact relationship between level of education and level of literacy. However, according to IALS results, we can assume fairly high literacy needs among Canadians who have not finished secondary school.[4]

Sampling differences between the IALS and LEARN research mean that the results of this comparison must be interpreted with caution. Because the demographic make up of the Canadian population is known, Statistics Canada could draw a demographically representative sample for the IALS survey. In contrast, the demographic make up of the population of people who call literacy groups is not known; therefore, a demographically representative sample of individuals could not be chosen. Instead, LEARN drew a broad sample of literacy groups to collect information from all people who call for services. Although a large number of diverse literacy groups participated, and an impressive number of surveys were returned, the LEARN data are not representative in the same way that IALS data are representative.

What does all of this mean? In practical terms, it means that without more advanced statistical examination, we do not know the *exact degree* to which the below results are accurate. Are people who actually call literacy groups representative of the range of people who have literacy needs in Canada? At present we can explore general trends but cannot be definitive. This comparison is intended to raise questions and act as a guide for further research.

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[3] Unlike IALS, LEARN did not measure literacy level.

[4] See *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*, Statistics Canada, 1996, pp. 23-29.

Demographic Comparison of IALS and LEARN Research Respondents

Age

Table 1 shows the IALS and LEARN age distributions of those who do not have a high school diploma.[5]. This 32% represents more than five million individuals. Seventeen percent of these individuals are between 16-24, 14% are between 25-34, 14% are between 35-44, 15% are between 45-55, and 40% are more than 55. Generally speaking, we can think of the IALS figures as representing the degree of literacy need within a given age group, and the LEARN figures, the degree to which those with literacy needs are seeking services. If people were calling in proportion to the literacy needs in the general population, the LEARN figures would closely match the IALS figures.

Table 1 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents without high school diplomas fall into each age group?

Age	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total
LEARN	27%	39%	23%	7%	4%	100%
IALS	17%	14%	14%	15%	40%	100%
Difference	10%	25%	9%	-8%	-36%	NA

Note: This table represents the 80% of LEARN respondents and the 32% of IALS respondents who have not completed secondary school.

Instead, however, we see that younger people are dramatically over-represented among those who call literacy groups: 10% more calls than expected are made by people between 16-24 years of age; 25% more calls than expected are made by people between 25-34 years of age; and 9% more calls are made by people between 35-44 years of age. By adding the differences of younger callers (16-44) we see that, as a group, they make 44% more calls than IALS would lead us to expect. Another way of saying the same thing is that while 45% of Canadians with some secondary school

[5]Due to methodological differences between IALS and LEARN, Quebec could not be represented in any age related information in this report. Other information represents Quebec respondents who speak languages other than French as a mother tongue.

education are between 16-44 years of age, 88% of LEARN respondents with some secondary schooling are in this age group.

It follows from this that older Canadians are dramatically under-represented in relation to their literacy needs as a group. By adding the differences of older callers, we see that 43% fewer calls than expected were made by those more than 45 years of age. Put another way, although 55% of Canadians without high school diplomas are more than 45 years of age, only 12% of LEARN callers are in this age group.

The biggest gaps between IALS and LEARN are found within the 25-34 age group, with a 25% difference, and the 55+ age group, with a 36% difference. Although we do not know the exact precision of these figures, the gaps are large enough to point to a clear trend.

Tables 2 and 3 divide those without a diploma into two smaller educational categories. Table 2 looks at the age distribution among those with no secondary education (less than grade 9), and Table 3, those with some secondary education. In comparing the IALS and LEARN figures within each table, we can see the same pattern of over-representation of younger people, and corresponding under-representation of older people.

Table 2 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents with no secondary education fall into each age group?

Age	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total
LEARN	22%	38%	24%	11%	6%	100%
IALS	7%	9%	10%	15%	58%	100%
Difference	15%	29%	14%	-4%	-52%	NA

Note: This table represents the 45% of LEARN respondents and the 13% of IALS respondents who have no secondary education.

However, in comparing the differences *between* the two tables, it is clear that older people with no secondary education (Table 2) are even less likely to call than those with some secondary (Table 3). In every age group except 45-54, the gaps between IALS and LEARN are larger among respondents with no secondary education. In

other words, proportionately speaking, the fewer years of education those without a diploma have, the less likely they will be to call literacy groups.

Table 3 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents with some secondary education fall into each age group?

Age	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Total
LEARN	33%	40%	23%	4%	2%	100%
IALS	24%	18%	16%	15%	27%	100%
Difference	9%	22%	7%	-11%	-25%	NA

Note: This table represents the 36% of LEARN respondents and the 19% of IALS respondents who have some secondary education.

Why would people of more than 45 years of age be dramatically under-represented among those seeking literacy services? A partial reason could be that the cycle of hopelessness often associated with having literacy needs is exacerbated among older people. For example, older people often think that they are too old to learn and, if they are unemployed, that no one would hire them regardless of upgrading efforts.

Sex

Overall, women and men call literacy groups in approximately equal numbers (49% and 51% respectively). However, when female-male calls are examined in relation to level of education, a number of interesting patterns emerge. Table 4 shows the literacy need (IALS figures) by sex, in relation to actual attempts by women and men to access services (LEARN figures).

Of Canadians without high school diplomas, 48% are female and 52% are male (Table 4). Again, the point of interest is not the percentages in themselves, but the gap between IALS and LEARN percentages. Had the LEARN calls been 48% from women, and 52% from men (as found in IALS), we could say that women and men call literacy groups in equal proportion to what we would expect.

In fact, Table 4 shows there are 2% fewer calls from women than IALS leads us to expect. Because this figure is small, it should be interpreted cautiously. More research is needed to know if the gap in fact exists. This would be worthy research to

pursue because, although 2% seems like a small number, it represents more than 56,000 individuals.

Table 4 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents without high school diplomas are female and what percentage are male?

Sex	Female	Male	Total
LEARN	46%	54%	100%
IALS	48%	52%	100%
Difference	-2%	2%	NA

Note: This table represents the 80% of LEARN respondents and the 32% of IALS respondents who have not completed secondary school.

Tables 5 and 6 consider sex within smaller educational categories. Among those with no secondary education, women make 1% fewer calls and men, therefore, 1% more calls than we could expect from IALS (Table 5). Table 5 shows that women with some secondary education make 10% fewer calls than expected (and men, therefore, 10% more than expected). This means that most of the gaps between men and women found in Table 4 is accounted for by people with some secondary school education.

Table 5 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents with no secondary education are female and what percentage are male?

Sex	Female	Male	Total
LEARN	47%	53%	100%
IALS	48%	52%	100%
Difference	-1%	1%	NA

Note: This table represents the 45% of LEARN respondents and the 13% of IALS respondents who have no secondary education.

Table 6 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents with some secondary education are female and what percentage are male?

Sex	Female	Male	Total
LEARN IALS	45% 55%	55% 45%	100% 100%
Difference	-10%	10%	NA

Note: This table represents the 36% of LEARN respondents and the 19% of IALS respondents who have some secondary education.

Part of the explanation for the overall gap between women and men may lie in their different rates of labour force participation. For example, a higher percentage of women work at home and may feel less pushed to do upgrading. Also, women are more likely than men to have service sector jobs which, by definition, require (and thus maintain and even develop) higher literacy skills. So, though the level of education is the same, the opportunity to maintain skills over time may be somewhat different for women and men.

Community Size

Table 7 illustrates that among those without high school diplomas, 75% live in urban areas with populations of more than 15,000 people. Twenty-five percent of those without a diploma live in rural areas of less than 15,000 people. If urban and rural people were calling in direct proportion to their need in the population, we would anticipate that, of the LEARN respondents without a diploma, 75% would be from urban areas and 25% would be from rural areas. As seen in Table 7, literacy groups in urban areas received 2% more calls, and rural groups 2% fewer calls than IALS would suggest. This gap, while small, represents many people and is worth further exploration.

Table 7 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents with some secondary education live in urban areas, and what percentage live in rural areas?

Community Size	Urban 15,000+	Rural 15,000-	Total
LEARN IALS	77% 75%	23% 25%	100% 100%
Difference	2%	-2%	NA

Note: This table represents the 30% of urban dwellers and the 47% of rural dwellers who have not completed secondary school.

When the variable of sex is considered, the urban-rural differences are more dramatic. Table 8 shows the female-male distribution of IALS and LEARN respondents by community size. In rural areas, women make slightly more calls than expected (2%). However, in urban areas, women call 9% less often than expected.

Table 8 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents without high school diplomas live in urban areas, and what percentage live in rural areas?

Community Size	Urban 15,000+			Rural 15,000-		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
LEARN IALS	47% 56%	53% 44%	100% 100%	42% 40%	58% 60%	100% 100%
Difference	-9%	9%	NA	2%	-2%	NA

Note: This table represents the 30% of urban dwellers and the 47% of rural dwellers who have not completed secondary school.

Employment Status

The information from both IALS and LEARN confirms that people with less than a high school education are at a clear disadvantage in the labour market. In both IALS and LEARN, those without a high school diploma are dramatically more likely to be unemployed and those with paid employment, are more likely to be employed part-time than full-time. Still, in every employment category, LEARN respondents are

even more likely to be unemployed, or to have part-time work than their educational peers from IALS.

According to IALS, of those Canadians without a high school diploma, 30% have full-time work, 8% have part-time work, and 8% are unemployed (Table 9). In contrast, 23% of LEARN callers have full-time work, 10% have part-time work, 36% are unemployed. Clearly, high numbers of people call literacy groups as a strategy for increasing employability.

It is interesting that 33% of LEARN callers are in the paid labour force. Given how difficult it is to combine work and school, 33% is actually quite a high number of people to have called. Clearly this 33% is the tip of an iceberg, representing individuals who would be highly motivated to do workplace basic skills programs.

Table 9 What percentage of IALS and LEARN respondents without high school diplomas fall into each employment category?

Employment Status	Full-time	Part-time	Unemployed	Other[6]	Total
LEARN	23%	10%	36%	31%	100%
IALS	30%	8%	8%	55%	100%
Difference	-7%	2%	28%	-24%	NA

Note: This table represents the 80% of LEARN respondents and the 32% of IALS respondents who have not completed secondary school.

[6]This category includes students, homemakers, and those on social assistance. I strongly suspect that much of the difference between the "Unemployed" and "Other" categories in Table 9 are definitional rather than actual.

Conclusion

This comparison uses level of formal education as the basis from which to compare demographic profiles of Canadians with literacy needs (IALS) and those who actually call literacy services (LEARN). Are people who call literacy groups representative of the range of people who have literacy needs in Canada? Based on this IALS-LEARN comparison, it is fair to say that a number of demographic groups are not being reached in proportion to their literacy needs. Though sampling difference prevent us from drawing definitive conclusions about exact numbers, a number of trends are clearly present based on age, sex, community size, and employment status. The results of this comparison can be used to formulate hypotheses for further research.